

Ovarian Cancer at Twenty-Two

A Survivor's Story

INSHEERA LACHHMAN

L'auteure raconte son expérience comme jeune fille affligée d'un cancer des ovaires et les tourments liés aux traitements prescrits. Elle décrit l'aide de sa famille comme faisant partie intégrante du traitement et du processus de sa guérison.

Okay so this is the official 15th straight day I've spent at the hospital and it's not exactly a walk in the park. In early February I was feeling pain and a swelling in my tummy but took no notice of it really. I thought that it was my appendix and so I went to a walk-in-clinic.

The clinic turned out to be no help whatsoever. The people there simply told me I needed an ultrasound and that I needed to book it on my own. That was soon forgotten though, as when my boyfriend called the ultrasound place they didn't have appointments available for another two to three weeks.

It wasn't until the following week, when I was in school, that something major happened. I was simply going up the stairs to my class when my body suddenly couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't breathe or anything. My tummy looked as if I was at least seven months pregnant (it was very swollen and uncomfortable).

It was that day, Tuesday, February 10th, that I went to the nearest Emergency Room. I waited eleven hours to see a doctor who in turn told me there was nothing she could do except prescribe local antibiotics, which were just "given" to patients with my complaints. She also said that I would need to come back for an ultrasound the following day because she didn't have time to do it right away, so I was told to go home and wait for a phone call.

I got that call around 8:00 a.m. the next day. On Wednesday, February 11th, I had a 2:00 p.m. appointment for an ultrasound. When I did the ultrasound they found a massive build up of fluid in my pelvis and abdomen. It wasn't until this point that the doctors became alarmed. They sent me back to the Emergency Room to wait another long four hours until I saw the doctor that I'd seen the previous day.

She basically told me that it was abnormal and that there was still NOTHING she could do until she had a CT scan done. They needed the CT scan to find out, or pinpoint exactly, where the fluid was coming from. Then she told me to go home and wait for another call, this one regarding my CT scan. Again, I went home and waited...

I waited from Wednesday the 11th to Friday February 13th until I finally got that call ... only to be informed that they were extremely busy and couldn't book the CT scan appointment until the 3rd of March. There was nothing I could do. I waited swollen, uncomfortable, and in extreme pain. I was anxious to find out what the problem was. I mean, how could someone go from having a flat stomach and within a week look like they were seven or eight months pregnant?

During the afternoon of Friday, February 13th, I was trying to take a nap, hoping to sleep off some of the pain. Instead, I just couldn't breathe. The fluid in my tummy was crushing and putting extreme pressure on everything inside of me, including my lungs I guess...

My mother called 911. The ambulance arrived fifteen minutes later. And that's when it all REALLY began—me being here and all.

Friday, February 13th I was driven to the Emergency Room and finally admitted into Scarborough Hospital. Because I'd been here so many times that week, it didn't take long for the doctors to come to the conclusion that I needed a CT scan URGENTLY!

While in the Emergency department, the doctors tried to drain some fluid to relieve me of some discomfort. I was poked and prodded and a biopsy was attempted not once but twice. My body wasn't reacting to the local anaesthetic. Throughout the ordeal I was in excruciating pain and it felt like I was literally being butchered.

I got a room later that night. There were three other women in the room with me. One of the women was infected with a virus she caught in a nursing home. She was moved shortly after I arrived. And the rest of us had

to be put in quarantine. Oh, I have a room all to myself now though, so it's kind of nice.

Enough of being sidetracked. I got admitted on a Friday which I discovered isn't the best day to be hospitalized since doctors and RNs like their time off.

They were unable to do anything regarding the CT scan I needed so urgently because it was the weekend. I had to wait until Monday. With my wonderful luck, it turned out that Monday, February 16th was Family Day, a holiday here in Ontario!

So, once again, the CT scan was pushed to the following day, a day before my twenty-second birthday. On Tuesday, February 17th, I got the CT scan and they drained some fluid for testing, etc. The doctor decided that draining the entire thing might not be smart and asked that a tube be left inside my tummy for only four hours.

Within the four hours, they drained eight and a half litres of fluid from my tummy that was causing me discomfort. Relieved at no longer being bloated, my spirits were lifted and I believed that this terrible ordeal would soon come to an end. I excited to go home. But I was mistaken. I got my hopes up in vain.

Being in the hospital on the day of my birthday, I decided, was no excuse for me to not have my birthday party. My family and friends brought a cake, presents, roses. It seemed as if the fourth floor of the hospital belonged to us on my birthday. Even the nurses joined in the fun and had cake and beverages. I was happy to be surrounded by my loved ones but I was still in some pain, and somewhat high on drugs they gave me to help keep me as calm and as comfortable as possible.

No one knew the results of my CT scan, so my family and I were waiting patiently. We were told that the doctors suspected something but an official biopsy would have to be done so that they could test the fluid in my stomach before they knew exactly what they were dealing with.

It turns out that the fluid extracted from me was filled with cancer cells. The doctors have no idea what kind of cancer it is, so their job now is to pinpoint exactly where the cancer originated. I was told that this would be a difficult task for them because the cancer is EVERYWHERE in my stomach and pelvis, and it could have come from anywhere, and it could have also spread easily and attached itself anywhere in my body because the fluid was touching nearly all of my organs. They had pretty much put me on a "not surviving" list in the hospital and gave me more drugs to keep me comfortable and sedated.

That was the first time I ever saw my father shed a tear! I had just turned twenty-two and I was juggling two part-time jobs and full-time school. How can I be diagnosed with CANCER? No one in my family has ever had cancer, not even distant family, so how could this happen to me? This is a question that will haunt me for the rest of my life.

The hospital was clear in telling me that there was nothing that could be done for me in their care. I need

to be transferred to another, more specialized, hospital. Apparently, Sunnybrook, the cancer hospital, is full too. So, I'm waiting...

So—there you have it, everything that's been happening. Not to mention:

- Not only having to deal with cancer
 - My boyfriend and I being over (thank God) but what timing
 - Family stressing me
 - I'm so stressed: worried for my mom and dad
 - I have a million bills to deal with
 - Work
 - School
 - Receiving employment benefits or not?
 - Trying to get started on a procedure that will help me and stop waiting
 - My parents are taking so many days off
 - Insurance!
 - Everything*
 - I wonder how Ash [my brother] really feels about all this
 - Man oh man, my list could be never ending but for now it's about 6:00 am and Sivani [my best friend, who I also call Sister] needs to wake up in 1 hour and 15 minutes.
- I'm going to try to get some shut-eye.
I have faith, hope, and I believe I'll be okay by the grace of God.
Pray for me.
Insheera

During my stay in the hospital the head nurse on my floor, Concordia, took a liking to me, thank God. She pushed for me to be seen at Sunnybrook's Odette Cancer Center. I was taken there in an ambulance and then back to Scarborough General Hospital after the appointment, my beloved head nurse at my side. She had finished her shift but decided to come along with my family and me for moral support. At Sunnybrook another biopsy was done and a sample was taken for testing and a draining tube put in again for another four hours. A second eight and a half litres of fluid were extracted from me.

The results obtained at Sunnybrook showed that I had ovarian cancer. This is very strange for someone my age apparently. It turns out that most women diagnosed with ovarian cancer are over the age of sixty-five. I was scheduled to start a series of chemotherapy treatments to reduce the mass in preparation for surgery. After the surgery, I was to have a month to recover, and then I would be expected to continue chemotherapy for another three months.

A pic line was surgically inserted through a vein in my arm that led right above my heart to allow the chemotherapy agents to be pumped through my heart evenly to all the areas in my body that needed it. This was done under local anaesthetics and I felt the entire process as if I had

not been given any medication at all. The doctor doing the procedure actually ended up cutting herself with the same scalpel she used to make a small incision in my arm and was furious. It wasn't pleasant to have to endure more testing and pokes due to someone else's careless mistake. I was tested for HIV and everything else you can possibly think of after that incident. She never apologized, but I assume she was happy to hear that I had nothing contagious. Cancer isn't something that can be transferred by bodily fluids; there are a variety of different possible causes or factors that contribute to its appearance.

womanly parts. He did assure me, however, that he would remove only what was necessary, but I should not expect too much because my case was very bad to begin with.

After the four-hour surgery, thirty staples, and three stitches later, I was overjoyed to hear that only my left ovary was extracted along with my appendix and some fatty tissue in my stomach and pelvis. I was subjected to the hospital for another week before I was sent home to recuperate and prepare myself for more chemotherapy that would start in June.

The second time around doing chemotherapy was more

The chemicals had me vomiting within an hour. My nails turned black, my skin pigmentation darkened so all my scars and imperfections were highlighted, and all my hair fell out. I lost fifty pounds over the two months of treatment. And the blood transfusions made me smell different.

Anyhow, before chemotherapy I had no idea what to expect, but I assure you, it's not something I would wish on my worst enemy. The chemicals had me vomiting within an hour. I was unable to smell certain things. My nails turned black, my skin pigmentation darkened so all of my scars and imperfections were greatly highlighted, and to make matters worse, all of my hair fell out. I lost fifty pounds over the two months of treatment. And the blood transfusions I was given made me smell different, only for a few days, but nonetheless it was a strange experience that confirmed for me that everyone really does have their own scent.

I got to go home for the first time in mid-April. I shed a few tears of joy to return to the familiar place I called home. My joy was short-lived though, for I returned to the hospital two days later because I was unable to eat or drink. I had to be given IV fluids twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The chemotherapy had taken its toll and I had to be restored to handle the surgery scheduled for April 30th, 2009. There were no available operating rooms at Sunnybrook, so my oncologist was going to come to Scarborough General to do my surgery there.

The surgery was the only thing that profoundly affected me throughout the entire experience. The chemotherapy I could take. The pain I could endure and the pokes and butchering were just part of the process to me, but to have a complete hysterectomy and strip me of my womanhood I could not deal with. There was nothing I wanted more than to be a mother. I love children and I've always hoped and prayed for two happy, healthy children that I carry to full term and birth from my own body. Nothing could bring me more joy than to create a little life of my own with my own flesh and blood. So you can understand the dread and sorrow I felt when I was forced to sign those papers giving the surgeon full rights to remove all of my

intense it seemed, or maybe it was because I was in and out of the hospital weekly or at least every few days. I was assigned a home care nurse who was very helpful but I only saw her when I was lucky, or strong enough I should say, to be at home. I missed her quite often because I was so frequently in the hospital. My blood count would drop massively and I was lacking potassium and magnesium and a bunch of other things that a normal human being would require in their blood to survive. I was also prone to infections and needed to be rushed to the hospital every time my temperature was above 38 degrees Celsius. Oh, not to mention that I was not only being fed poison to get rid of the cancer that was already killing me, I was also literally starving to death. I wanted to eat but every time I did I vomited. I couldn't even hold down liquids at one point. It got so bad that one can of Ensure used to last me a period of five hours or more. Every half hour I was awakened by my parents or family members just to take a sip or two and go back to sleep.

I couldn't walk very far because being bedridden for months caused my muscles to deteriorate and because I was so weak from no nutrients, I was forced to use a cane to keep my balance. I needed assistance to shower, eat, and move. I have never felt so helpless in my entire life. I was barely able to hold a spoon for even that was too heavy. All the while going through this physical trauma all I could think about was how it affected those around me.

Only after my surgery did my parents reveal their real concerns. They had apparently asked doctors before I had started chemotherapy what stage my cancer was in when they found it. The answer was shocking—my cancer had been stage four. My parents also asked what my chances were of coming out of this entire ordeal alive or cured and they were told five to ten percent. Apparently the treatment was surely going to kill me, and if that didn't, the surgery

would. If I was lucky enough to survive the surgery, my body would surely give up during the subsequent set of treatments. Thankfully, their sharing this with me just made me stronger and encouraged me to push harder to live, not only for myself but for my loved ones as well. My family had supported me throughout the entire process and I got as far as I did because of it. Although no one believed I would make it, I had to stay alive for everyone. There was no other option.

I can't imagine what that news must have been like for my parents and loved ones. I was concerned about them and their jobs. I was worried about my parents' health who seemed to never sleep. My mother would spend nights at the hospital with me only to get up at 4:00 am to go home, shower, change, and go to work only to return again in the evening to be at my side. My brother would visit every day after school, and I would see how he stressed because chunks of his hair were beginning to fall out too. My best friend, whom I call my sister, would rotate nights with my mother so she could get some rest and she also went straight from the hospital to work and back.

I was never left alone. Not for one second did I feel unloved or neglected. I was constantly encouraged and reminded that I was needed and wanted and loved. I was always in a positive environment and I never believed that I was not going to make it out of that experience alive, strong, cured and happy. Even when I was at home from the hospital and was continuing treatments, my cousin would come and stay with me until my parents were home from work. She also used to wait hours for my chemotherapy appointments to be over while holding my hand at the hospital. I was so loved and supported that I simply couldn't imagine disappointing everyone by not being here. I was always happy, energetic, outspoken and outgoing. The nurses at Scarborough General, whom I still visit to show my progress, will all tell you the same thing.

August 18, 2009 [after my first surgery, and my father's birthday]

My world is spinning 150 miles per hour.
The darkness is blinding. I'm fighting,
I'm gasping for breaths. The air is so cold!

I see nothing—I hear nothing—I feel nothing.

Holding on to this fine thread is my only link to
my past
my only link to who I was
the only link to all that I know.

I struggle as I feel my lifeline slip away...
Gone, forever ... I'll never be the same.

I'm left bloody and broken on these razor sharp rocks

in the darkness.

Now I'm trying to find myself.
Trying desperately to pick up these pieces of my life
and hold my head high.

As I look into the distance I see a light approach
me.

Without knowing what to expect I hold my breath
and anticipate the worst.

I'm cold. I'm shivering. But somehow its presence
warms me, calms me.

It comes to a halt before me.

Enchants me with its brightness.

I'm lost in a mesmerizing gaze—its beauty is a total
phenomenon.

The way it makes me feel is foreign—so new.

My battle scars of life are welcomed by open arms.
I drown in the warmth of its embrace. There is an
aura around that glows—it's extraordinary.

Their smiles are priceless and I truly melt away in
the love and emotion given to me.

Never before have I been held like this.

Never before have I felt so completely and utterly
safe and secure.

Never have I felt love like this. This is so real. This
is us.

Family
Forever and always
Insheera

I would have never been able to endure all that I have nor
be as strong as I am if it wasn't for my wonderful, amaz-
ing and highly supportive family and friends. Mom, dad,
Ash, Sister and Lisa, I love you with all my heart! Thank
you for helping me through a near impossible situation!
You are my light!

—Insheera, May 2010

In June 2010, Insheera Lachmann graduated from Seneca College. She was in the hospital on the date of her graduation because her doctors found a mass on her surviving ovary. Luckily, surgery revealed the mass to be a cyst and her right ovary remains intact. Every three months she has routine CT scans or ultrasounds to ensure there are no signs of the cancer returning. So far so good. In September 2010, Insheera Lachmann married Nevill, her knight in shining armour, who was extremely supportive during her second cancer scare.